

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Amy T. Matthews, *End of the Night Girl* (Wakefield Press, 2011).

End of the Night Girl is an accomplished and memorable first novel from Amy T. Matthews. Written and developed as part of the author's PhD in creative writing at the University of Adelaide, it won the Adelaide Festival Unpublished Manuscript Award in 2010, guaranteeing publication with Wakefield Press. Prior to winning the award, it had been passed over by several publishers, presumably because its Holocaust narrative presented a dilemma and publishers were unwilling to take a risk on a new author posing some difficult questions and writing a very detailed account of life in a concentration camp.

However, the novel is more than a Holocaust narrative. The central character, Molly, is a waitress in an Adelaide restaurant. She is overworked and often verbally abused in the fast-paced kitchen and dining room. But the dynamics of the kitchen are complex – a blend of camaraderie and humiliation. Adding to the complexity of Molly's workplace is her affair with the married chef, who seems a father figure in her complicated psyche. The restaurant and kitchen scenes give the impression of authenticity – they are so well written.

In Molly's home life, she has been living alone since her break up with Dan, but her pregnant step-sister has just arrived on the doorstep with a suitcase. In the past, there is a fantasy-like relationship with Peter, the love of her life, from which Molly is still trying to recover. Although Peter and Molly were good friends, and their attraction was undeniable, Peter was also a married man, so the sexual tension is palpable.

Living with her step-sister brings more complication to Molly's life. She only has a one-bedroom apartment and Lizzie is a high-maintenance, ballet loving health freak with a recently broken engagement and an awkward relationship with her father. But Lizzie has changed, she's suddenly stocking up on cheese and pasta, and is willing to sleep on the couch.

When she's not working, Molly is in the grip of an obsession with a young Polish girl. The two stories, Molly's and Gienia's, are interspersed throughout the novel and sometimes seem to blend or resonate. In the beginning there are just a few odd words from Gienia's world that bleed through into Molly's consciousness. For example, in this passage where Molly and Chef have just slept together for the first time.

Afterwards, beneath the sound of our uneven breathing, I hear the clink of four little words, softly, like glasses toasting, like cutlery touching, like ice cubes colliding in the glass – *little house, shtetl square*. (22)

Then the sections become quite separate stories but here and there the events and emotions are similar, as though Molly's feelings are reborn in Gienia's world. Initially, it is a little confusing to be jolted out of Molly's point of view and not just into another character's viewpoint, but a different decade and continent. I'm reminded of Ruth Park's *Playing Beatie Bow*, although there are major differences. *Playing Beatie Bow* is set in two different centuries, but in the same place, and the characters enter each other's world. Although the device can be disorienting, trust the author

Book reviews: *End of the Night Girl* by Amy T. Matthews. Debra Zott.

Transnational Literature Vol. 4 no. 1, November 2011.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

because the interweaving is so well executed that before long it will appear to be seamless. Readers may find themselves wondering about Molly's mental health at times as the two narratives overlap and interact.

Eventually it becomes apparent that Gienia is being transported to a concentration camp and the detail appears to be shockingly accurate and completely believable. It also transpires that Molly is writing Gienia's story and this raises some interesting questions about her right to do so, to write about the Holocaust. Matthews faced these same questions during her writing of the novel and the same questions might have been in the minds of publishers who rejected the manuscript. If you like this novel, you might also be interested in reading Matthews' PhD exegesis, *Navigating the Kingdom of Night*.

Molly finds a photograph of 'Gienia' in a volume of *Peoples of the World* in the library reference collection.

In the centre of the page, uncaptioned, was a photo of a girl. She was teenaged, soft, somehow unformed, unfinished. Her cheeks were round, her eyes pale, her hair hidden by a headscarf. Her gaze was directed above the cameraman's head. What was she looking at? Why is she smiling? Her lack of caption worried me. (81-2)

She tears out the page and adds it to her growing collection of Holocaust material.

It is really refreshing to read a novel that is, for the most part, set in Adelaide. Too few novels written in Adelaide are set here! It lends another dimension to the narrative when readers can bring their own experience of place to bear on the story and there are references to the *Adelaide Review*, rather than the *New York Times*, and local bands such as E-type Jazz.

Bravo to Amy T. Matthews for this brilliant novel – the most engaging I have read for a while; and bravo to Wakefield Press for ensuring that *End of the Night Girl* got the publication it deserves.

Debra Zott